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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001356

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [IR](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: ARCHBISHOP AUDI SUSPICIOUS OF HIZBALLAH
AND AOUN

REF: BEIRUT 229

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a May 2 meeting with the Ambassador and econoff, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Ilias Audi bemoaned the lack of leadership in Lebanese politics, especially "those who pretend to be leaders who are working in their own interests." The Ambassador briefed Audi on Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's visit to Washington and on Washington's concerns about Sunni extremism, Iranian and Syrian influence, and Hizballah. Audi agreed with the Ambassador's concerns, saying that Amal is essentially a subsidiary of Hizballah. He continued that Hizballah appears to see itself as separate from Lebanon and is under the influence of Iran. Over the course of the meeting Audi got more specific about "those who pretend to be leaders," criticizing Aoun for his agreement with Hizballah. Audi also questioned Aoun's patriotism, reciting a growing rumor that Aoun had made a special deal with Syria before returning to Lebanon in 2005. End summary.

SINIORA'S VISIT

2. (C) On May 2, the Ambassador and econoff met with Greek Orthodox Archbishop Ilias Audi. The Ambassador complimented Audi on his strong, clear Easter Day sermon. Audi responded that it is in his character to be clear and to describe the situation as it is. He said his sermon was motivated by "those who pretend to be leaders who are working in their own interests. They do not keep Lebanon in mind." Audi bemoaned the Lebanese mentality of thinking not of Lebanon, but of one's own family, tribe, or community. (Note: Ironically, Audi, a frequent patron of the Virgin Megastore, then went on a ten minute monologue of how a new French language book, "The Voyage of the Christians of the Orient" by Frederic Pichon, had barely covered the Greek Orthodox community. End note.)

3. (C) The Ambassador briefed Audi on Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's trip to Washington. The Ambassador said the trip was a success and assured Audi that Lebanon remains a top USG priority. In addition to many short-term concerns about reform and the presidency, the USG sees four long-term concerns: growing Sunni extremism, growing Iranian influence and funding, resurgence of pro-Syrian elements, and the continuation of Hizballah's state-within-a-state. Audi agreed that these were four major concerns for Lebanon. He said that Sunni-Shia tensions are high and have been since

the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Audi saw fertile ground in Lebanon for Sunni extremism that Syria and Iran will undoubtedly exploit and support. He also agreed that Syria maintains significant influence in Lebanon. Regarding Hizballah, Audi saw it as becoming more and more powerful, having made Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and his Amal movement a subsidiary. "You don't hear anymore about Amal," Audi commented. Audi said that he supports the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon and opposes any armed force outside of the Lebanese military.

WARY OF HIZBALLAH AND AOUN

14. (C) Audi, going into more detail, commented that he sees Hizballah as getting stronger. He also sees the Shia party as becoming more dangerous. He noted that when Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah threatened to cut off the

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hand of anyone trying to disarm the "resistance," Nasrallah used the word "us" to describe Hizballah and spoke of Lebanon in the third person. This is an important distinction, explained Audi, because it shows how Hizballah thinks of itself as separate from Lebanon. In a conflict between Lebanese and Iranian interests, Audi wondered out loud which side Hizballah would support.

15. (C) Audi saved his most strident criticism for Michel Aoun. Audi admitted that March 14 and Saad Hariri were not always sincere, but went into detail on Aoun's alleged insincerity. Audi asked the Ambassador rhetorically: "When you speak with Aoun about the Hizballah agreement, you probably don't hear the word 'Lebanon' at all." He continued that Aoun appears to be sacrificing everything to become president. For example, Aoun has given cover for Hizballah

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to maintain its militia. Audi questioned Aoun's patriotism. How did he return to Lebanon so easily (implying a secret deal with Syria)? Why is he talking to pro-Syrian politicians? Audi concluded that Aoun's behavior does not suit a president. Asserting that many Lebanese share his doubts on Aoun, Audi nonetheless admitted that Aoun's popularity in the Christian community appears to be holding steady. He attributed this to Christians feeling insecure and wanting someone that will defend their community. In closing, Audi noted that an American Greek Orthodox Archbishop had invited him to visit the United States.

COMMENT

16. (C) Audi's criticism of Aoun is not new. In a January meeting, Audi had expressed his opposition to Aoun (reftel). End comment.
FELTMAN